

Grape Grower to Wine Exporter

by Jackie Jarvis

RIRDC Rural Women's Award 2010 WA finalist Jackie Jarvis and her husband run their Margaret River vineyard, Jarvis Estate. She was proud to represent the south west of Western Australia to look at issues in the wine industry. Jackie tells her story.

My first foray into a "rural industry" was when I was 13 years old. I grew up in Wanneroo, which at that time was home to many commercial vegetable growers, and my mum worked for a local grower. When I was old enough, she took me along to work and I spent many hours on weekends and school holidays planting, picking and packing cauliflowers, capsicums, lettuces and celery and one awful weekend shovelling chook poo.

Mum suggested that I should study horticulture after I finished school. I was horrified and assured her that I would never work on a farm again. After leaving school, I promptly got a job in a bank.

In 1992 I accepted a work-related transfer to Busselton, where I met my future husband Matt. A work-related promotion saw us return to Perth for a couple of years, but the pull to the south west was too strong.

In 1996 we moved to Margaret River, sold our Perth home and purchased a bare 22 hectare paddock with the intention of planting grapevines as a "hobby".

I can still remember the first day of hand planting. Our first born daughter, Caitlin, was seven months old and sat at our feet as we commenced the painstaking task of planting what would become a nine hectare vineyard. In 1998 our second daughter, Madison, was born and we were still planting vines!

We are essentially farmers; we're grape growers. Our plans of being contract grape growers evaporated when, due to the rapidly increasing vine plantings in the region, the price being offered for fruit would not cover our cost of production - never mind our huge bank interest bill.

We decided to value add and employed the services of a contract winery to make our premium fruit into wine. We released our first wine in 2002 and, in partnership with Austrade and a family contact in Ireland, managed to become exporters without ever leaving Australia.

International travel was not an option with two young children and a husband still working full-time off the farm. Telephone and email contact became a valuable tool, sales increased steadily and in 2004 I was presented with an International Business Council Award in recognition of my success as a wine exporter, just a few months after our third daughter, Ashlee was born.



Jackie Jarvis proudly represents the south west and the wine industry.

Unfortunately, in the following years a number of factors combined to the detriment of small wine producers, especially those exporting. Overproduction saw some larger producers flood export markets with wine, some being sold below cost. We saw the emergence of premium wine coming from South America where low labour costs offered a significant price advantage and an increasing Australian dollar did not help either.



Jackie and her family among the vines at Jarvis Estate.

As a small family-run business we have been able to quickly change our focus and, despite a reducing export market, we have grown our market share considerably in domestic markets by taking advantage of over-production. We have become a major local purchaser of bulk wine surpluses for blending, thus lowering our cost of production. This has enabled our business to contribute in a small way to reducing the “wine glut” whilst helping us to price match with the larger producers.

I nominated for the Rural Women’s Award to look at a number of issues in the south west WA wine industry. I hope to research new export markets and marketing innovations to lead the local industry into a resurgence, based on a good balance of domestic and export sales.

Ours is a capital intensive industry and obviously these costs need to be tax deductible. Taxation is a kind of a double edged sword for the wine industry. Managed investment schemes in the market place have contributed to over supply issues.

As our business already sells more wine than we can produce from our own vineyard, any increase in sales will enable us to increase our purchases of WA produced bulk wine and enter into fruit buying contracts with other local growers.

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